

## A Classification for the Reader

Ruth Rutzen

*Director, Home Reading Services  
The Detroit Public Library*

Our library literature is replete with statements that indicate that the goals and functions of the public library are vitally concerned with the interests and needs of people in general. In fact our most recent statement, as found in *Public Library Service* says in part: the library's function "is to assemble, preserve, and make easily available to all people the printed and other materials that will assist them to:

Educate themselves continuously  
Keep pace with progress in all fields of knowledge  
Become better members of home and community  
Discharge political and social obligations  
Be more capable in their daily occupations  
Develop their creative and spiritual capacities  
Appreciate and enjoy works of art and literature."<sup>1</sup>

Are classifiers and catalogers concerned with pronouncements such as these? Or has it been assumed that a shelf arrangement which stems from a classification which is a systematization of knowledge and originally was aimed at a service for scholars and specialists can logically be used by another service in libraries whose purpose is primarily planned to provide the popular education services for the general reader?

The well-established classification and catalogue departments in large libraries make it seem efficient to class a book for a large main library collection or for a series of special departments, and then apply this same classification number for the book in branch libraries. This appears to be the quick and cheap way to do it. In the smaller independent libraries the suggestions for class numbers made by the H.W. Wilson Company, the A.L.A. Booklist, or maybe by the Library of Congress, frequently aid the busy librarian to organize a collection.

In 1937 in her book, *The Classification of Books; an Inquiry into its Usefulness for the Reader*, Dr. Grace O. Kelley, originally a classifier and later a reader's consultant, highlighted the pitfalls of so-

called close or specific classification.<sup>2</sup> Those of you who remember her book will recall her great concern with questions such as these: Why do the methods of classification of books bring to light so small a proportion of the library's total material on a definite subject? Or why are the books on the subject in which one is interested scattered in so many places on the shelves? In speaking of her experience as a reader's consultant in a large public library she states repeatedly that to assemble books on subjects according to the way they had been asked for by readers and according to the USE that was to be made of them, it was almost always necessary to gather them from many places in the classification system.

Visualize then if you can a non-fiction collection of 15,000 or fewer books bearing class numbers which originally were assigned to books in collections four or five times that large or for specialized departments. Imagine the kind of books that stand next to each other in a bookmobile under even a fairly simple Dewey classification.

I think we will all agree that we have attempted to overcome the hazards of shelf arrangements which stem from a Dewey-organized collection by means of booklists, displays, more displays, exhibits, etc. This can become what I call the bargain basement approach. The English librarian Ernest A. Savage produced a whole book titled *Manual of Book Classification and Display*<sup>3</sup> in which he has a chapter, "The Home Reading Library as an Exhibition of Books", which provides detailed descriptions of equipment and methods for displays. An interesting but not too helpful a book for us. We question seriously whether these devices will ever be sufficient to overcome what may be improper organization of material to begin with—improper for accomplishing our frequently stated goals and objectives, these goals so succinctly stated in the *Post-War Standards* and again stressed in our new guide, *Public Library Service*.

In the Detroit Public Library the responsibilities for these popular education aspects of the service have been delegated to the Home Reading Services as represented in the branch libraries and the Home Reading Department at the Main Library. The special departments of the Main Library provide chiefly reference and research services with a heavy emphasis on subject specialization. We in the Home Reading Services also have a specialty—it is that of being generalists. By that we mean that we have a working knowledge of good books in all fields. We select our own materials and we believe we need our own organization of those materials.

The Detroit Public Library's interest in a Reader Interest Classification goes back to 1936 when Mr. Ralph Ulveling, then Associate Librarian, addressed a communication to branch librarians about an experimental arrangement. In it he said:

For some time I have wondered whether our popular book lending service as organized on traditional lines is pointed directly enough toward our service objectives; that is, whether the

organization of our circulating units is adapted to the function we are trying to fulfill.

Interestingly enough it was in 1937 that *People and Print* by Douglas Waples was published. In it he made the observation that a "psychological classification" of books was needed which would relate the peculiar appeal that books make to readers of a given description to that appeal. He also said that for a book "to pass from the stacks of a library . . . to the reader's hands the publication must be advertised . . . It must escape the oblivion of the general catalogue or open shelf and come to the prospective reader's attention."<sup>4</sup>

In his thesis on the purpose and administrative organization of branch libraries, Lowell Martin repeatedly points to the necessity for recognizing in the branch library different goals and functions than in the main library. He says about the branch:

No longer can it look passively toward a continued role as a poor copy of the main research and reference center. Rather it faces a distinct task as an agency for distributing that portion of popular educational, cultural, and recreational literature which the policies of the institution dictate . . . The branch is . . . to be treated not as an imitation of the central library—differing only in scaling down of standards.<sup>5</sup>

Later he says,

The number of potential general non-fiction readers may be so great and service to them so important that a considerable section of the book stock should be removed from the conventional classification scheme and rearranged in terms of the reading interests of this group.<sup>6</sup>

I have used these fragmentary quotations to introduce the Reader Interest Classification to show that our experiment is not merely a scheme arbitrarily designed to do something different. It is a sincere attempt to overcome hurdles in public service long recognized by others.

## WHAT IS THE READER INTEREST CLASSIFICATION?

It is a book arrangement that recognizes the variety of reasons prompting people to come to the library. It is not a classification of the fields of knowledge but a shelving arrangement based on broad areas of interest which relate themselves to the needs of people. These broad areas have been designated as interest categories. They are subdivided by a varying number of sub-headings, depending on the type of category and the size of the collection. Some categories are browsing sections for the general reader; others are subject groupings aimed at a particular use by the reader.



In setting up what we have designated as browsing categories we have had in mind: (1) the readers who have no fixed needs in mind but who are stimulated to recognize their interests by the category indicating a broad general field; and (2) those who are conscious of their interest in certain fields and can associate it with definite subjects but not with related interests.

In setting up the so-called subject categories we have in mind the reader who comes to the library for help with a particular need but not necessarily a specific request. In large part the practical books concerning family life, vocational and avocational subjects fall here.

### HOW IS THIS ARRANGEMENT DETERMINED?

We begin with a consideration of people, their interests and needs—not with the contents of books alone. What are the primary interests and needs of people? We said that your interests and mine had roots in these large areas: (1) the improvement of ourselves as individuals, culturally, socially, and vocationally; (2) our involvement and participation in the affairs of our primary social unit, the home; (3) our concerns stemming from our relationships and responsibilities to our community whether local, national, or international.

We were interested in a statement which we found in a speech by Mr. C. Scott Fletcher, President of the Fund for Adult Education, published in a pamphlet titled *The Great Awakening*, which appears to corroborate the above statement. He says:

The individual must be prepared, not just to work, but primarily to live—at the same time both a unique person and a fellow member of the human race. His various lives intermingle. The major roles of the individual are three: in the *home*, on the *job*, and in the *community*.<sup>7</sup>

We have written brief statements on the purpose and content of the fourteen categories now accepted as standard. Time will not permit a full reading of these but you have in your hand a statement titled "The Reader Interest Book Arrangement in the Detroit Library" which, beginning on page two, lists all fourteen categories with suggested sub-headings. I will refer here only to the few categories and sub-headings for which sample shelf lists have been distributed. The first sheets indicate authors and titles of selected sections of the shelf list for the three sub-headings normally found under the general category CURRENT AFFAIRS. Our statement for this category reads:

Purpose: This is a browsing section to serve the adult reader interested in the present-day world—politics, economic trends, and social problems.

Content: This section must be kept small and up to date. The division between national and international affairs will be

arbitrary. The sub-heading *Trends in Science* should contain only those books which are directed toward the reader as a citizen, and not as a student.

The next shelf list sample shows the sub-heading *Child Care* under the major category YOUR FAMILY. For the category YOUR FAMILY we said:

Purpose: This is basically a subject section aimed at parents interested in books that pertain to the family and its members.

This sheet for the sub-heading *Child Care* shows readily how pertinent books in the general field are scattered under Dewey.

For the category PERSONAL LIVING we stated:

Purpose: This is a section concerned with the reader's interest in himself as an individual. It serves the browser primarily, with books of inspirational value and practical help.

Content: Includes popular psychology, some biography, books of personal religion and biographies of religious people, which will help the individual in his personal, spiritual, and emotional development, self improvement with some emphasis on the social graces, grooming, manners, and conversation.

For this sample selection from the shelf list we chose a listing for the sub-heading *How to Retire*. The sample selections from the shelf list show how the material on this new and ever-growing subject can be made useful for the many people now concerned with retirement. Like *Child Care* this is a subject that gets rough treatment under Dewey.

Large holdings are found in the category PEOPLE AND PLACES. About it we said:

Purpose: A browsing collection of readable books for those who prefer real life stories and experiences to fiction.

Content: This includes much popular biography, descriptive travel, and personal experiences. Since this is a browsing section, purely informational matter though it may fit geographically or historically should be in the INFORMATION category to which we refer later.

The samples chosen to illustrate this category picture the kind of books to be found under the sub-heading *Adventure* and another labeled *Law and Justice*.

The next sheet is for the sub-heading *House Plans* from the category YOUR HOME.

Purpose: This is a subject section bringing together all books relating to the house and how to live in it.

We had more arguments about the wording for the category THE BRIGHT SIDE than for any other category. We are not too pleased with it now. But several years use of it has achieved an identity for and it is now generally accepted. It is supposed to be for the person who is in the mood for something amusing. It is the gay, chatty, humorous satiric. It may be fiction, plays, essays, biographies. *Cheaper by the Dozen*, a Thurber anthology, and Emily Kimbrough rub elbows here. There are no sub-headings for this category. The sheet indicates that biography, fiction, even travel, besides humor are good additions to this category.

The response of the public to the category BACKGROUND READING is always most heartening. Our statement for it is:

- Purpose: A browsing section of books which will contribute to broadening the reader's cultural background and knowledge, arranged alphabetically by author.
- Content: Important books of the past which have stood the test of time, the classics, including novels, plus the serious, modern books which are important now. These books must meet a high standard of literary quality and appeal to the person capable of concentrated reading.

The last sheet tells a story of what may be found in it.

I will take no more time to describe other categories, but I must refer to the three which hold the bulk of the informational materials. They are TECHNOLOGY, BUSINESS, and INFORMATION. Ordinarily TECHNOLOGY and BUSINESS will have five to ten sub-headings. The number of INFORMATION will range from thirty-five to fifty or more depending on the collection. We describe these as subject categories containing factual material and textbooks for answering specific questions. Some of this factual material may cover the same subjects as are represented in the browsing sections. Books which are no longer popular or timely but have an informational value may be transferred from the browsing sections to the INFORMATION category.

### HOW ARE BOOKS FOUND?

Let me assure you every book has a fixed place on the shelf and only one place. The catalogue locates every book under author, title, and subject like any other catalogue.

Each category is assigned a letter, such as G for YOUR HOME. Each sub-heading has a number, such as 2 for entertaining, 4 for cooking, etc. In assigning these numbers space is left for additional sub-headings by skipping numbers. Within the sub-heading the arrangement is an alphabetical author arrangement.

This designation of letter and number is written in the inside back cover of the book and is stamped on top of the book. A six-band crown



dater, which carries all the letters of the alphabet and four bands of numerals, makes possible use of far more combinations of letters and numbers than we will ever need.

Large category signs designate the location of each category on the shelves. Sub-headings are shown on small sign holders (we use Princeton files) by title of the sub-heading and its numeral.

Each branch is provided with rubber stamps for the category designations. The catalogue card is stamped with the name of the category and the numeral of the sub-heading which applies to the book.

A borrower using the card catalogue can readily spot the category sign and, reaching the shelves, will quickly locate the sub-heading marker numbered for the title he is seeking. The many people who do not use the catalogue are quickly alerted to material of interest and significance for them.

At present the branch librarian and her staff determine both the category and sub-headings. An important aspect of this is that the local staff members have given consideration to the potential use of the book and the needs and interests of the individuals they serve. A significant by-product is increased book knowledge for the staff working with the people.

Can the central catalogue department take over this work? I see possibilities for some well trained person with experience in the home reading services taking over assignment of books to the categories. But the size of the collection and knowledge of the community in which the branch operates I believe will necessarily keep the selection and designation for sub-headings in the branch.

## HOW THE ARRANGEMENT SERVES THE LIBRARY

I want to make these points:

1. The Reader Interest Arrangement separates those books purchased to meet the general reading needs from the mass of books accumulated to serve the informational services of the library. Mixed shelving of these tends to bury and conceal the interesting titles from the potential reader for whom they were bought.
2. Book selection will be affected, because each title gets consideration in terms of its contribution to specific areas of interest and USE.
3. Both holdings and use of each category and sub-heading are readily obtainable, for example on October 24, 1959 we easily assembled the following figures from branch libraries, concerning holdings and circulation:

### Chase Branch

BACKGROUND READING	-	404 books, 42% out
YOUR FAMILY	-	561 books, 35% out

Hubbard Branch		
BACKGROUND READING	-	359 books, 47% out
Jefferson Branch		
YOUR HOME	-	1,118 books, 31% out
Edison Branch		
CURRENT AFFAIRS	-	218 books, 55% out
Chaney Branch		
BUSINESS - Sub-Heading		
Management & Supervision	-	60 books, 35% out

These figures show that Jefferson Branch does not need to build its collection on YOUR HOME except for new and exceptional titles. Perhaps it should do some weeding. Edison Branch definitely needs to build its collection on CURRENT AFFAIRS.

4. Both additions and withdrawals of books can be more safely determined.

5. The best collections are developed as new collections when the original purchases are determined with this arrangement in mind.

6. It is possible to reorganize Dewey classified collections. Interesting problems stem from the fact that some books will not fit anywhere. If they no longer have a good general appeal and do not represent sound information, they should be withdrawn.

## SUMMARY

Detroit started this experiment in the early 1940's with an alcove in the Circulation Department of the Main Library. Since 1948 six new branch collections have been organized with this pattern and thirteen older collections have been reorganized, one is now in the process of complete reorganization, several have set up a partial plan. Work has not started in the three largest branches having 40,000 or more books.

We have no hesitancy in transferring assistants from a Dewey-organized branch to a Reader Interest branch, and vice versa. However, once a branch librarian or an assistant has worked with the Reader Interest system he is always impatient with the Dewey system. It is the staff that has given the system its impetus in Detroit.

In closing let me refer to a statement by Dr. Das Gupta of the Delhi University Library, India, in his report on his visit to American libraries, published in *Annals of Library Science*, September 1956:

In the branches and in one department of the Detroit Public Library the organization of books on shelves is based on an engaging pattern of classification, derived from the basic interests of human life. Logically it involves cross-classification and,



therefore it is not Artistotelian. The ordinary schemes of bibliographical classification have one feature in common. They are analytical and they attempt to divide knowledge into mutually exclusive fragments. But a man's life is not fragmentary. For example, when people marry or set up a home or have children, the complex of their interests is as whole as life itself. To them the effect of any analytical schemes of classification, however broadbased, looks 'disorganized'. It is not less of classification that suits them better. They need a different kind of classification and more of it, with well-articulated, well-formed and well-organized details. The Detroit scheme of classification is a fine example of what the right kind of technique in its right place can achieve to liven up a mass of books in such a way that the arrangement itself communes with life. Such a classification helps the ordinary reader. It trains the librarian to see all-together the many lines of interest that pass through the nodal points of life, to assess from the use of books whether the library really has its roots in the community, and to develop concrete and humane notions of book selection and book service. Being, however, limited by its own relevant purpose, the readers' interest classification is not intended to be used to organize large collections of books for multipurpose use, for which analytical schemes of classification are better suited.<sup>8</sup>

We think Dr. Das Gupta has done a better job than we did in expressing the purpose and results of the Reader Interest Book Arrangement.

#### Notes

1. *Public Library Service* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1956) p. 31.
2. Grace O. Kelley, *The Classification of Books, An Inquiry into its Usefulness to the Reader* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1938).
3. Ernest A. Savage, *Manual of Book Classification and Display for Public Libraries* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949).
4. Douglas Waples, *People and Print, Social Aspects of Reading in the Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1937) p. 37.
5. Lowell Martin, "The Purpose and Administrative Organization of Branch Systems in Large Urban Libraries" (M.A. thesis Graduate Library School, University of Chicago, mimeographed), pp. 8-9.
6. *Ibid.* p 64.
7. C. Scott Fletcher, "The Great Awakening" *Southern University Conference* 1958 (Chattanooga?: (1958) p. 32. Note: the text is slightly different from the text in the pamphlet.
8. S. Das Gupta, "American Libraries, Some Impressions," *Annals of Library Science* III (September, 1956) 97.